

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

HERMAN A. OWEN

32nd Infantry Division, Truck Driver, World War II

1994

**OH
628**

Owen, Herman A., (1916-). Oral History Interview, 1994.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Note: There is no audio recording of this. Apparently, it was lost during the time period during transcription.

Abstract:

Herman Owen, who grew up in Rice Lake, Wisconsin, discusses his World War II service with the 32nd Infantry Division in New Guinea. Owen talks about growing up in Rice Lake (Wisconsin) and joining the National Guard in 1940. He speaks of training at Camp Beauregard (Louisiana) and spending his free time having “a few drinks with the boys,” and he mentions feeling ill equipped for combat. Shipped out on the *USS Monterey*, he describes landing in Adelaide (Australia), doing judo practice at Camp Woodside, and camping in the woods at Camp Table (Brisbane, Australia). Owen describes marching out of Port Moresby (New Guinea) and his first contact with the Japanese. He touches on interactions with the New Guinea natives and states they made very good stretcher bearers. On November 20, 1942, Owen talks about being wounded in a mortar barrage. Shipped first to the 13th Station Hospital in Townsville (Australia), he talks about running a fever and having surgery to remove shrapnel from his leg and stomach. He speaks about being sent by hospital ship to the 118th General Hospital (Sidney, Australia), receiving the maximum amount of treatment at O’Reilly General Hospital (Springfield, Missouri), and getting discharged August 24, 1943. Owen tells of using canes to walk into the draft office in Barron (Wisconsin) and the hush that fell over people because he was the first combat veteran to be discharged there. He talks about reentering civilian life and getting a job at the County Veterans Service Office. He discusses the services the CVSO offered World War II veterans including on-the-job training, schooling applications, transportation to hospitals, applications for compensation, and loans. He touches on a controversy over CVSO loans to counties and states he was voted out of office because of politics. Owen discusses World War II veteran housing issues and recalls getting 100% disability in 1968. He states he is a life member of several veterans’ organizations, and he served as a commander for the Veterans of Foreign Wars and as a district provider for the Disabled American Veterans.

Biographical Sketch:

Owen (b.1916) served with the 32nd Infantry Division in World War II. Born in Colfax (Wisconsin), his family moved to a farm in Rice Lake (Wisconsin) where he graduated from high school. He joined the National Guard October 6th, 1940 and was inducted into federal service nine days later. Owen was wounded during combat in New Guinea and was honorably discharged in 1943. He worked in the County Veterans Service Office from 1946 until 1965 and became a life member of the VFW, DAV, 32nd Division Association, American Legion, and Former County Service Officers Association.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1994.

Transcribed by Joanna Glen, 1997.

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2010.

Interview Transcript:

- Mark: Today's date is September 13, 1994. I'm doing an interview today with World War II veteran, Herman Owen of the 32nd Division in the South Pacific in World War II. Perhaps, Mr. Owen, you could tell me where you were born and raised. You were born and raised in Rice Lake?
- Owen: I was born in Colfax, Wisconsin.
- Mark: Where's that?
- Owen: Fifty miles of south and west a little bit.
- Mark: Perhaps you could describe your upbringing a little bit. Were you raised on a farm? In town?
- Owen: Well, I was born in Colfax December 26, 1916 and we moved to Rice Lake in 1924 and we lived in town from about November '24 until April of '25 and then we went out on a farm.
- Mark: So, during the Depression you were living on a farm. Did the Depression strike your family particularly hard? Was it a difficult time for you?
- Owen: Well, we farmed from 1925 until 1936. That's the year I graduated from high school.
- Mark: What did you do after you graduated?
- Owen: I drove truck and cut wood, a little of everything.
- Mark: When did you join the National Guard?
- Owen: October 6, 1940 and we were inducted into federal service October 15, 1940.
- Mark: That's when you first joined? You didn't join earlier and go to training once a month or something?
- Owen: Yah. You're right.
- Mark: You went down to Camp Livingston then?
- Owen: We went to Camp Beauregard, Louisiana.
- Mark: I assume that was the first time you had been down south?

- Owen: Yes.
- Mark: Could you describe your trip down there and what it was like at Camp Beauregard?
- Owen: We got to Beauregard it was raining, pouring down and I helped one of the cooks, we fried some bacon and eggs for supper. By the time we got done, they had as much water in them as they did bacon and eggs, I guess. We had to set up our own tents.
- Mark: This was before Pearl Harbor of course, and you were doing military training at the time. As I understand it, the war production hadn't really picked up yet. I wonder if you could comment on some of the equipment that you used during training. Did you have adequate equipment do you think or did you have like antique equipment?
- Owen: We had 30 caliber machine guns, the old _____ rifles and Warners of course.
- Mark: If you compared that equipment to the things that you used while you were actually in combat, how would you rate that equipment?
- Owen: We was ill equipped for that too [combat]. I had a Browning automatic and I learned how to take that apart and put it back together up there in New Guinea. I shot at 1000 range I guess. I remember back in 1939 I was in Menominee visiting an uncle when Germany invaded Poland.
- Mark: Do you recall your reaction at the time?
- Owen: I didn't really, you know, think too much of getting into war then. We had moved to Camp Livingston when the attack came on Pearl Harbor. When we went down to camp, we was supposed to stay there one year and then they changed it indefinitely, of course.
- Mark: After Pearl Harbor did your training change at all? Were things taken more seriously? Or were you pretty much prepared for a wartime situation before Pearl Harbor?
- Owen: We had the news and trained but we never had too much jungle training.
- Mark: I suppose there is no jungle in Louisiana. When you were down in Louisiana did you get off the post much and into the towns?

Owen: Not too much. We did now and then but we'd only get \$21 a month and that was raised to \$30. We went into town a few times, but not too many.

Mark: What did you do?

Owen: Have a few drinks with the boys and spent most of our time in camp.

Mark: When did you get your first orders to go overseas?

Owen: Well, we left Camp Livingston and went to Fort Devins, Massachusetts, and we was there about five or six weeks and then we got orders to go to Fort Ord, California and that was in April of 1942. When we got to Fort Ord, I remember a sergeant says, "Infantry?" I says, "Yah." He says, "You won't be here a week." And we were only there about four or five days.

Mark: Then you were off to the South Pacific?

Owen: Yah. We left from San Francisco on April 22, 1942 and we landed in Fort Adelaide on May 14, 1942.

Mark: That's a very long trip.

Owen: Well, we went over on the U.S.S. Monterey, my group was anyways.

Mark: What was the ship like?

Owen: It was a good size ship, we had a load of freight and I don't know how many troops. If we had run into a battleship we were sitting ducks.

Mark: Did people get seasick?

Owen: No, I didn't but many of them did.

Mark: I bet. Lot of Wisconsin boys on that ship didn't get on the water too much.

Owen: Most of us were either from Michigan or Wisconsin. I never did get seasick either way but we had a lot of them that did. They really got sick.

Mark: So then you landed in Australia?

Owen: We landed in Adelaide, Australia.

Mark: What was Australia like when you got there?

- Owen: It was a nice country. The Australians were very friendly people. Of course, we went out to Camp Woodside and I only got into Adelaide a couple of times. Once was for a parade and once I and a couple other guys went in. Taxicabs were driven by charcoal burners at that time you know. We did get some judo practice there and stuff.
- Mark: Was that part of your military training or was that something that you did on your own?
- Owen: That was part of our military training. We didn't get too much of that but instructed on what the jobs were like and had quite a little rain and wet weather while we were there.
- Mark: This base where you trained in Australia, where exactly is that in Australia. Do you remember?
- Owen: Woodside.
- Mark: Is that in the northern part of Australia?
- Owen: Its about thirty miles from Adelaide.
- Mark: Perhaps you could describe to me what it was like to go to New Guinea and the first combat experience of the 32nd Division.
- Owen: We went to Camp Table out of Brisbane and I was on the docks there and I thought the convoy must have got lost because there's nothing but woods and there I seen the signs D Company, M Company and so forth, so we actually, we just out in the middle of the woods - we built the camp after we got there, most of it. There was more training there every day and when we, while I was a truck driver all the time up until we got to New Guinea we didn't take our trucks of course, and they decided that they had to have a Browning automatic man for every other squad so I was given a Browning automatic. MacArthur came out and we got ready and we got out of there within about two days.
- Mark: Did you see MacArthur yourself?
- Owen: And our outfit, we flew into Port Moresby. About seven miles out they had an airstrip there. As soon as we landed I was looking over them God forsaken jungles and I thought, "Let the Japs have em!" That night they bombed the Air Corps and we were just far enough away that we just got shook up a little bit, not any direct bombing right on us.

- Mark: In Port Moresby. How long did you stay there before you went north?
- Owen: I don't just remember. Probably three or four days when we started moving out. We flew part of the way and marched part of the way. We had the coastal part of it, the 128. The 126 left; they went right over the old _____ it took them 42 days and they were really beat up when they got there. Some of the troops came up by ship and they got there after we did too. Our first contact with these loser Japs they leveled an _____ right down through the _____. If they would have known that they only had one regiment in there they could have annihilated us but they didn't know that. Their intelligence was guessing at 1500-2500 troops and they were going to be in _____ in about three or four days. Of course our communications was bad, so they had these little _____ luggers they called them to bring up our supplies. They could get in fairly close to shore and we had to go, with the help of natives, and unload. I know one of them was loaded with hospital supplies and ammunition and the Japs bombed them so we were low on ammunition to begin with. We really went into action I would say in November when it really started getting rough then. Then I was hit November 20, 1942. From there I was transported back to Port Moresby and I was there three or four days.
- Mark: Then what happened?
- Owen: They just had emergency treatment there and then I was shipped to the 13th station hospital at Townsville.
- Mark: Back in Australia?
- Owen: Back in Australia.
- Mark: Where you were hit? On the arm? Legs?
- Owen: What?
- Mark: Where did you get injured?
- Owen: I got in my thigh. _____ bones on each side of my leg and shrapnel, pieces under my skin in my stomach.
- Mark: In the jungle, I would imagine that you would have a problem with infections and those sorts of things. Did you get any infections?
- Owen: Well, I did run high fevers, but they never found out. They just called it fever _____ and from the 13th station hospital I was

shipped to the 105th general hospital at _____, Australia. It might have been an agricultural school or something before it was made into a makeshift hospital. There I had surgery and from there we went by hospital ship went down to 118th general hospital in Sidney, Australia and there we had the whole 5th floor of Prince Albert's Hospital.

- Mark: Did you ever hook up with your unit again, or were you sent back to the States.
- Owen: No, I wasn't sent back again, at the 118th Hospital they decided to send me home for discharge. So I got into _____ General Hospital on the 29th of May, 1943 and I was there about three or four days and was sent to the O'Reilly General Hospital at Springfield, Missouri and when I had all the maximum hospitalization they could do for me there, they discharged me on August 24, 1943.
- Mark: I see. By this time were you able to walk again? How would you characterize your recovery up to that point? It sounds to me like you were in the hospital a long time. Your wounds must have been rather severe.
- Owen: Well, when I got home I weighed 115 pounds. I was using two canes to get around. When I got home I had to sign up for the draft because I went in before the draft. When I came down to the draft office you could hear a pin drop. So I said to the girl, "Why is everybody so quiet?" She said, "Don't you know you're the first combat veteran to be discharged here?"
- Mark: That was in Rice Lake?
- Owen: That was the draft office which was in Barron. But I was in Rice Lake.
- Mark: I've got a couple more questions about New Guinea and then I want to get on to some post-war experiences of yours. The first thing I was wondering was did you see many of the New Guinea natives while you were there? Did you have much contact with them?
- Owen: Oh yah, litter bearers were natives. They carried me out. After they got me, while I had a medic from Indiana who first treated me and then a doctor of German descent and the natives carried us back until we got to one of these posts and we had to travel by night and I was with them until we got to a makeshift airstrip and I was flew from there into Port Moresby. The natives were a big help up there.
- Mark: It's my assumption that they got along well with the Americans? Did they speak English by some chance?

- Owen: Huh?
- Mark: Did they speak English?
- Owen: No. A few of them did, most of them talk a kind of pig Latin. They were very considerate. When they was carrying me they had to lay me down and one of them found some palm leaves that kept the sun off my face. They made very good litter carriers.
- Mark: The second thing I wanted to ask you about New Guinea, what did you think and feel while you were actually in combat? I assume you would have been scared?
- Owen: Actually, when I got hit I just figured, well, you did everything kind of spontaneously I guess. I turned around to this sergeant and I said, "I'm going to try to make it to this next tree up here," and I got about half way up there and I got right in the middle of a mortar barrage and that's the last I remember for a little while.
- Mark: Then you were unconscious and woke up later.
- Owen: Not scared at all.
- Mark: Was civilian life difficult for you with your wounds and your war experiences?
- Owen: Well, I took a job driving truck for a while and I was even tending bar for a little while but that was too much on my feet. So I was standing on the _____ one day in '46 and I was thinking well, maybe I should go to Alaska. I had relatives up there. One of the county board members approached me about working in the veterans service office. So he told me to go down and put in my application and that's how I got in down there. I was in there from May 1, 1946 until January 1, 1965.
- Mark: That's quite a long time. For a while you were the Assistant CVSO right?
- Owen: I took on-the-job training for a year or so and I was actually on full-time all the time.
- Mark: Perhaps you could describe the sort of activities that would go on in the County Veterans Service Office. I would imagine after World War II it was extremely busy.
- Owen: Yah. We were real busy at that time. We did a lot of on-the-job training programs. World War I veterans were getting up there where they had this

non-service connected pension, you know and we did a lot of those and so forth and a lot of hospitalizations. I used to drive a lot of them right into the hospital in Minneapolis.

Mark: What about the World War II veterans? What sort of problems did they have? What brought them to your office?

Owen: Loans, schooling, some of them were crippled up, filed comp for them and so forth. We had a lot of schooling applications and on-the-job training at that time.

Mark: Did people mostly come in for federal benefits like the GI Bill and those sorts of things or were State programs more popular? Could you even describe which would be more popular?

Owen: GI loans and State loans - a lot of those and some aide in some cases, we had a local fund, plus the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Mark: Would you describe a typical day in your office? Like you get there at nine o'clock. What sorts of activities?

Owen: Got there at eight o'clock. Pick up the mail and go through that and answer correspondence that had to be answered, but by that time, usually somebody was coming in. Lot of times I had to leave the office and go out to - had a lot of cases where people were killed in combat and I'd have to out and contact the folks and apply for compensation for them. It was busy.

Mark: So, while you were working there did you know Walter Hueser?

Owen: Yah.

Mark: And you worked with him for a while.

Owen: No. He was out of the office then. Worked with Virgil Clark for a while.

Mark: I see. It's my understanding that you were involved with the controversy over CVS0 grants to counties in the '50's and '60's.

Owen: In fact we didn't get the grants until after I got out of the office. There was a political thing. I was voted out of the office 26 to 25 and about 750 to 800 veterans showed up the next day protesting the decision but it didn't do much good - it was too late.

- Mark: Was a grant like that important for someone in a county like Barron County where you were?
- Owen: Oh yah.
- Mark: In what ways?
- Owen: Well, it would give the service officer more money and I guess they still have that, don't they?
- Mark: Now, yah.
- Owen: I know the service officer makes more money in one year than I made in five back then.
- Mark: That's probably true. If you could comment on some of your own post-war experiences other than working in the County Veterans Service Office. For example, did you use any of the benefits yourself, like GI Bill for a housing loan or something like that?
- Owen: Oh, I got a state loan for \$3500 to buy my house.
- Mark: Did veterans after World War II experience the same problems that Vietnam veterans complained about after the war? You know the problems like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and problems finding housing and all those kinds of things. Were those problems for veterans in Barron County?
- Owen: Yah. We had some federal housing once and they were rented out for fairly cheap rent. We lived in one for a while and we tried to buy it and fix it up the way we wanted to but they wouldn't go for that, they tore them down instead.
- Mark: Did veterans have trouble finding housing after that?
- Owen: No, not really, not too much. I rented for a while of course and then I bought my house in 1954 and I got a mortgage from the State at the time. After I got out of the office I sold insurance for a couple of years and finally my disability got to where I couldn't work anymore and they gave me 100% in 1968.
- Mark: I've just got one more question for you and it's about veterans organizations. I'm wondering if you could tell me if you have joined any veterans' organizations?

- Owen: I've acted with the veterans all my life and ever heard of the VFW? I'm a life member. I'm a life member of the Disabled American Veterans, I'm a life member of the 32nd Division Association and I'm also a life member of the American Legion.
- Mark: When did you join all these organizations?
- Owen: Well, I joined the VFW in '43 right after I got home, and the DAV three or four years later, and the Legion I joined around 1944.
- Mark: Were you active in these organizations? Did you attend the meetings and participate?
- Owen: Oh yah, I've been real active in the VFW and the DAV. I was district provider for the DAV for three years.

treasurer for them for around 20 years and the VFW, I was commander there and I'm also quartermaster and still get to most of the meetings you know. Right now I'm on a walker so--
- Mark: What made you join these organizations?
- Owen: Well, I guess I was convinced they were a good thing to belong to and I got active in them, two friends from World War I and so forth.
- Mark: Is there anything else that you'd like to add? I finished all my questions.
- Owen: Well, I was wondering if you would like to interview one of our boys who went through all of the thing from _____ to 1945?
- Mark: Why sure!
- Owen: The name is Gifford Coleman. His telephone number is 715-234-2666.
- Mark: He was in World War II you said?
- Owen: He was in D Company also but he went through the whole thing, the Philippines and all that. He could give you a lot more than I could.
- Mark: I'll give him a call. Would you mind if I used your name?
- Owen: No. Give him a call. He'd be home today.
- Mark: I thank you for taking some time today. I sincerely appreciate it.

Owen: Yah, well, I'm glad to help you out.

[End of Interview]